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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to assess the explanatory powers of three theories of sex role development: secondary reinforcement through parental nurturance; instrumental conditioning by dating partners; and social learning through observations of outcomes for mothers. Subjects' responses to questionnaire items were utilized to measure the predictive power of these three theories. Data is presented on adoptive and biological couples. Subjects were classified as primarily upper-middle class and were matched on a number of categories, including age, education, income and length of marriage. Adoptive subjects were significantly more conservative or traditional in their sex role ideologies than were biological parents; this was true for men as well as women. Of the three theoretical approaches, only secondary reinforcement through parental nurturance was found to be significantly accurate in predicting sex role ideology for the women subjects. Women with traditional sex role ideologies usually reported that they maintained close ties with their parents and tended to report that their mothers had been somewhat disapproving of them as children. (Author)

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Abstract

An Examination of Three Theories of Sex Role Development

in a Sample of Adoptive Parents

Cheryl Travis, Ph.D., Becky Francis

The purpose of the present study was to assess the explanatory powers of three theories of sex role development, secondary reinforcement through parental nurturance, instrumental conditioning by dating partners, and social learning through observations of outcomes for mothers. Subjects' responses to questionnaire items were utilized to measure the predictive power of these three theories. This paper presents data on adoptive and biological couples. Subjects were classified as primarily upper-middle class and were matched on a number of categories, including age, education, income and length of marriage. Analysis for content validity of the items tapping each of the theoretical approaches indicated considerable overlap or redundancy between items related to parental nurturance and parental outcomes. Adoptive subjects were significantly more conservative or traditional in their sex role ideologies than were biological parents; this was true for men as well as women. Men in general tended to be somewhat more traditional than women. Of the three theoretical approaches, only secondary reinforcement through parental nurturance was found to be significantly accurate in predicting sex role ideology for the women subjects. Women with traditional sex role ideologies usually reported that they maintained close ties with their parents and tended to report that their mothers had been somewhat disapproving of them as children.

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An Examination of Three Theories of Sex Role Development in a Sample of Adoptive Parents

The purpose of the present study is to assess the explanatory powers of three theories of sex role development, secondary reinforcement through parental nurturance, instrumental conditioning by dating partners, and social learning through observations of outcomes for mothers. Subjects' responses to questionnaire items were utilized to measure the predictive power of these three theories. Earlier research on college students with extreme sex role ideologies indicated that social learning through the observation of outcomes for mothers was highly effective in predicting sex role ideologies. However, each of the three theories was supported to some extent (Travis & Seipp, in press). This study addresses the question as to whether or not these three theories would predict well across the entire range of opinions relating to sex role ideology, and whether or not the theories would predict as well among adult men and women who were older and perhaps had more firsthand experience in performing elements of the sex roles associated with their respective ideologies. In this light, we have identified three relevant groups, couples who have applied to adopt a child, couples who are biological parents, and couples who have full time careers for which they receive a salary. This paper is actually a preliminary report, and includes data only on the adoptive and biological couples.

The theories we studied do not always have specific theorems or corollaries that relate directly to sex role ideologies. Some specific assumptions were necessary to derive many of the predictions. For example,

secondary reinforcement theory suggests that children imitate and eventually identify with parents to the extent that the parent consistently fulfills the child's needs. The behavior associated with this situation has been termed parental nurturance. We assumed that the parents of our adult subjects would present a traditional role model for emulation and that therefore high parental nurturance would be associated with traditional role behavior and traditional sex role ideologies. We assumed that the parents of our subjects would present a traditional role model because the parents would range in age from 50 to 65 years. Thus, they probably received a large part of their sex role socialization during the 1930's. We predicted that our adult subjects who were identified as generally traditional in their sex role ideologies would report that they perceived both their mother and father as especially supporting when they were young and that they currently maintain close ties with their parents. Other assumptions were also necessary for prediction concerning the instrumental conditioning theory. Instrumental conditioning can occur under a variety of circumstances, but we felt that peers can and do control many of the contingencies associated with our social behavior (Wahler, 1967). We made two assumptions concerning instrumental conditioning by peers; first, that an important period for such conditioning occurred during early dating experiences; and two, that most individuals in our sample initially attempted to fulfill the traditional patterns of dating. Based on our understanding of instrumental conditioning and these assumptions, we predicted that those subjects who reported success in their early dating experiences would, as adults, adopt traditional sex role behaviors and ideologies.

The third approach, social learning, suggest that actual rewards and costs need not be experienced for learning to occur. It is reasonable to infer, therefore, that some elements of sex role ideology and perhaps preferences for behavior are acquired through observation of outcomes associated with a particular role. With respect to this theoretical approach, we assumed that the mothers of our subjects were the key role performers. We predicted that if these mothers were perceived as being well satisfied and happy in the role of wife, mother, and homemaker, that our subjects would tend to have traditional behavior patterns and ideologies.

Method

Subjects: As mentioned previously our subjects consisted of men and women who had applied to adopt a child and men and women who were already biological parents. The adoptive subjects were registered with 8 child-placing agencies and 1 organization composed of adopting men and women. The agencies were located in 5 cities in the state of Tennessee including the four most populous cities in the state. These subjects were normally solicited at the convenience of agency personnel and were informed that their cooperation in the study was anonymous and would not reflect on evaluations made by the agency. Subjects completed a questionnaire (which will be described shortly), in their homes and returned it by mail. Of the 300 subjects originally solicited, in the adoptive category, 154 have returned their questionnaires. Approximately 240 biological subjects were identified through a quota sampling system. Telephone listing for all letters of the alphabet were used in the appropriate census tracks. These subjects were contacted by phone and a questionnaire was sent to those who indicated an interest or willingness to participate. The questionnaires are being returned anonymously by mail. Although it is somewhat early in this phase of data collection, it appears that the return rate will approximate that of adoptive subjects. The sample size is at present

52 subjects. This is only the beginning of data collection on biological parents, and we hope to eventually attain a sample size comparable to the adoptive sample. The biological sample of parents come entirely from the city of Knoxville, but these subjects have, however, been matched with the adoptive subjects on a number of categories, including age, education, income and length of marriage. The subject pool for the biological category was defined as those subjects living in census areas closely resembling the demographic characteristics of the adoptive subjects. Based on the average education level and income level, subjects were classified as primarily upper-middle class. The average age was about 30 years for women and 32 years for men. The average education was about 2½ years of college. The average income was $21000. And the average length of marriage was 9 years.

Questionnaire: The questionnaire consisted of several sections. The two relevant to this paper were a sex role ideology scale concerning women, and 9 questions specifically related to the three theories of sex role development for which we derived predictions concerning sex role ideology. The sex role ideology questionnaire involved 6 items dealing with such issues as educational and career opportunities for women, happiness associated with various role behaviors, and personal-psychological characteristics of women. This short scale correlates significantly with the Spence-Helmreich scale. An r equal to .53 was obtained which is significant at the .005 level. It also correlates significantly with the Wellesly Role Orientation Question, with an r of .53, significant at the .005 level. The range and mean scores for the current sample of adults is similar to those of the earlier college sample.

Three questions were asked with respect to each theoretical approach to sex role development; these were presented in a Likert format. Scores on these questions were analyzed to determine group differences between biological and adoptive subjects and to predict sex role ideology scores. Questions that provided scores on parental nurturance asked 1) whether or not the subjects maintained close ties with their parents 2) their perception of their mother's acceptance of them as a child, and 3) their perception of their father's support of them as a child. Questions that provided scores on dating experiences asked subjects to 1) estimate their degree of dating success, 2) to indicate how social they were in high school, and 3) to indicate the amount of admiration and support they received from dating partners. Questions that provided scores on social learning asked subjects to estimate 1) the success of their parents' marriage 2) the degree of satisfaction their mother received as a homemaker, and 3) the variety of activities their mothers found compatible with the role of homemaker.

Results

Intercorrelations among the 9 items related to specific theoretical approaches indicated a number of significant relationships. Table 1 illustrates these. Correlations of items within a specific theoretical context are presented in triangles and can be thought of as an indication of convergent content. The average correlation for a group is presented on the right side of the group. The relationship of any item with any other item in any theoretical context can also be seen in Table 1. The correlations within the blocks represents an indication of divergent content between two theoretical contexts. The average correlation for a given triangle cluster should be higher then any average correlation for a block of items. A comparison of average correlations for triangles and blocks is a way of roughly assessing discriminant content among

the items.

All items derived from parental nurturance formulations, items 1 through 3, are significantly correlated with one another. Referring to Table 1 an average correlation of .29 was found within this theoretical grouping. Items 4 through 6 concerning dating success show moderately positive correlations, but it appears that admiration from dating partners (item 6) is tapping a different dimension of dating experiences. When this item is deleted it changes the indications of convergent and divergent validity. This is indicated by the correlations that are in parentheses in Table 1. Items 7 through 9 relate to observations of outcomes for mothers and are also generally positively correlated with one another.

It appears from Table 1 that there is considerable overlap or redundancy between parental nurturance and parental outcomes. Warm, supportive parents are also seen as being fairly satisfied with their marriage and their roles in life. The block in the far right corner displays this relationship. Items which involve dating experiences are apparently basically tapping a different dimension. This can be seen by comparing the average correlations of the dating experience triangle with the blocks above and to the right of it.

Now if you will look at figure 1, it contains information concerning the sex role ideologies of our subjects. Analysis of the Sex Role Ideologies of our subjects indicated that adoptive subjects were significantly more conservative or traditional in their belief patterns than were biological parents, this was true for men as well as women. Apparently then the high motivation to become a parent is not simply related to the woman's desires but also to the man's to fulfill a traditional family pattern. It was also the case that men in general tended to be somewhat more traditional than women

concerning the most appropriate role for women to fulfill. This suggests that there may still be some basis for social-political conflict between men and women in our society that extends beyond formal institutional practices.

Figure 2 compares the sex role developmental histories of men and women. No differences were found when distinguishing between the categories of adoptive and biological parents. Women in general reported closer relationships with their parents. This was significant at the .01 level. Men and women reported equivalent perceptions of their dating success and their mother's satisfaction in her role.

The explanatory or analytic contribution of each theoretical orientation was assessed by means of multiple regression equations conducted separately for men and women. Of the three theoretical approaches only one was found to be significantly accurate in predicting sex role ideology. And this was true only for women. This was parental nurturance and warmth or the secondary reinforcement theory.

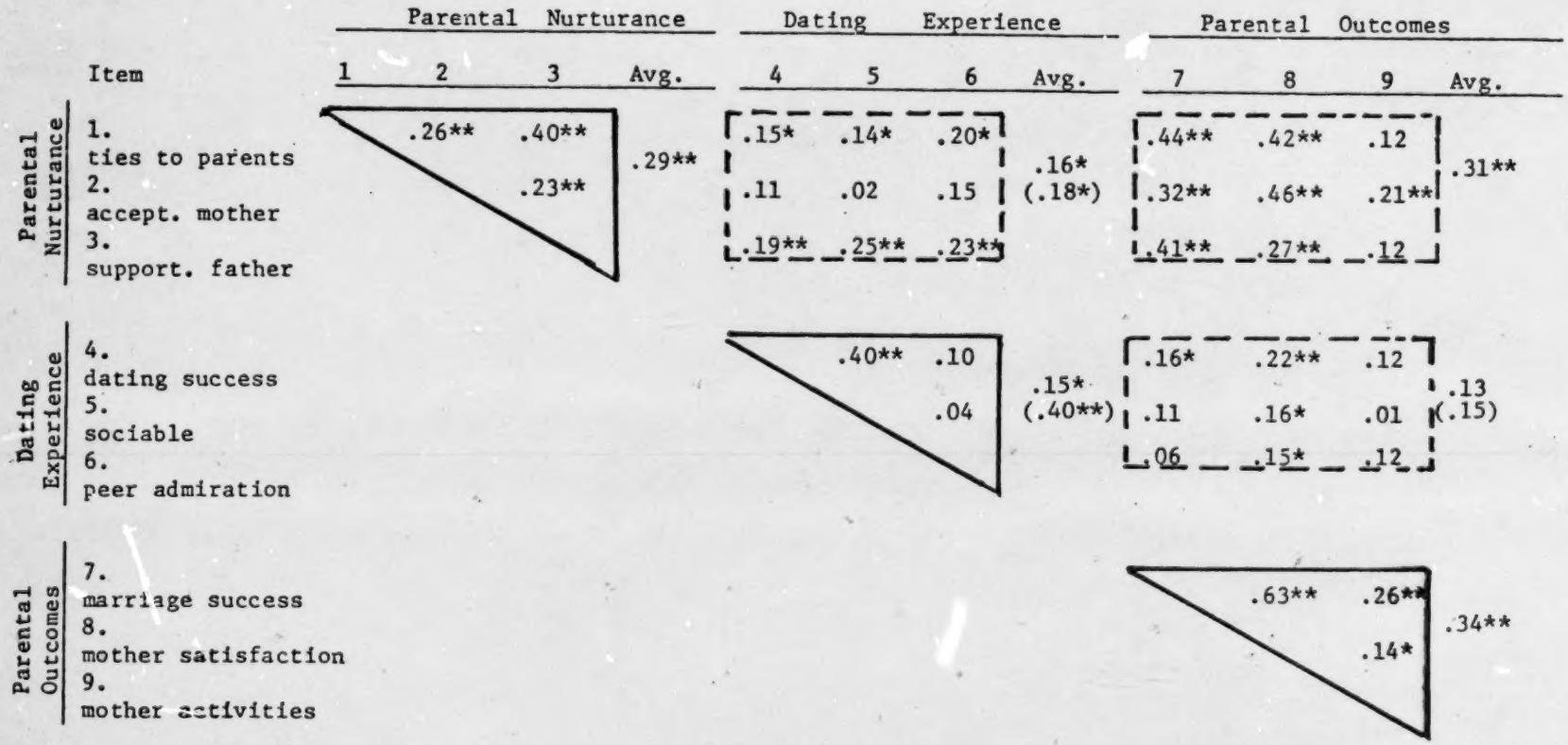
The three items tapping parental nurturance were ties to parents, accepting mother, supportive father. The multiple regression coefficient was significant for the parental nurturance approach ($R = .27$). Women with traditional sex role ideologies usually reported that they maintained close ites with their parents ($F(1,102) = 4.41$, p .04). This makes sense within the framework of secondary reinforcement and on a common sense level that shared values lead to more interaction and conflicting values likely lead to greater distance. However, the warmth and support of the father was not a significant factor in adult sex role ideology. The predicted relationship between sex role ideology and acceptance by the mother was actually in the reverse direction.

Women with traditional sex role ideologies tended to report that their mothers had been somewhat disapproving of them as children ($F(1, 102) = 6.04$, $p < .01$). This is a completely unexpected result. There are a couple of possible explanations for this finding. A post hoc interpretation might be that strong belief about traditional roles for women are reflecting a compensation for disturbances in the earlier mother-daughter relationship. Adherance to a traditional orientation may represent an attempt to gain a non-nurturant mother's approval. It is a relationship, in any case, that is not compatible with the basic tenets of secondary reinforcement.

Perhaps this puzzling relationship between mother's acceptance and the daughter's development of a non-traditional sex role ideology can be better understood by exploring the relationship between the mother's acceptance and the mother's involvement in activities outside the home and her satisfaction in her role. From table 1 it appears that the accepting mother seems to be the satisfied mother and also the mother who is involved in activities outside the home. Jane Lazarre has written an insightful book into her experience as a mother. Entitled, The Mother Knot, this book focuses on the demands of motherhood which often lead to a loss of freedom and identity when the mother's needs are subordinated to the child's. In referring to mothers who frequented a park with their children, she states "Very few of the mothers were content. There was no mistaking their boredom, their shortness of temper, their martyred dedication." (p. 191). This personal account lends support to the notion that the mother who restricts her interests solely to her family is not necessarily the most psychologically nurturant and accepting.

In this study mother's perceived involvement in activities outside the home was likely restricted to the options available to women at that time, in the 1950s and 1960s. With these constraints lessening, contemporary women, who have had mothers who were accepting and involved in community activities,are likely to extend their sex role attitudes and behaviors to encompass behaviors for women outside of what has been traditionally accepted. The mother of the 1950s, involved in activities outside the home may have been inadvertently modeling social skills that could easily lead to a non-traditional sex role orientation and behaviors in a more tolerant and liberal environment.

Table 1
Coeffients for Convergent Content (Triangles) and
Discriminat Content (Blocks) N = 206



(Figures in Parentheses Represent Average Correlations When Item 6 is Deleted)

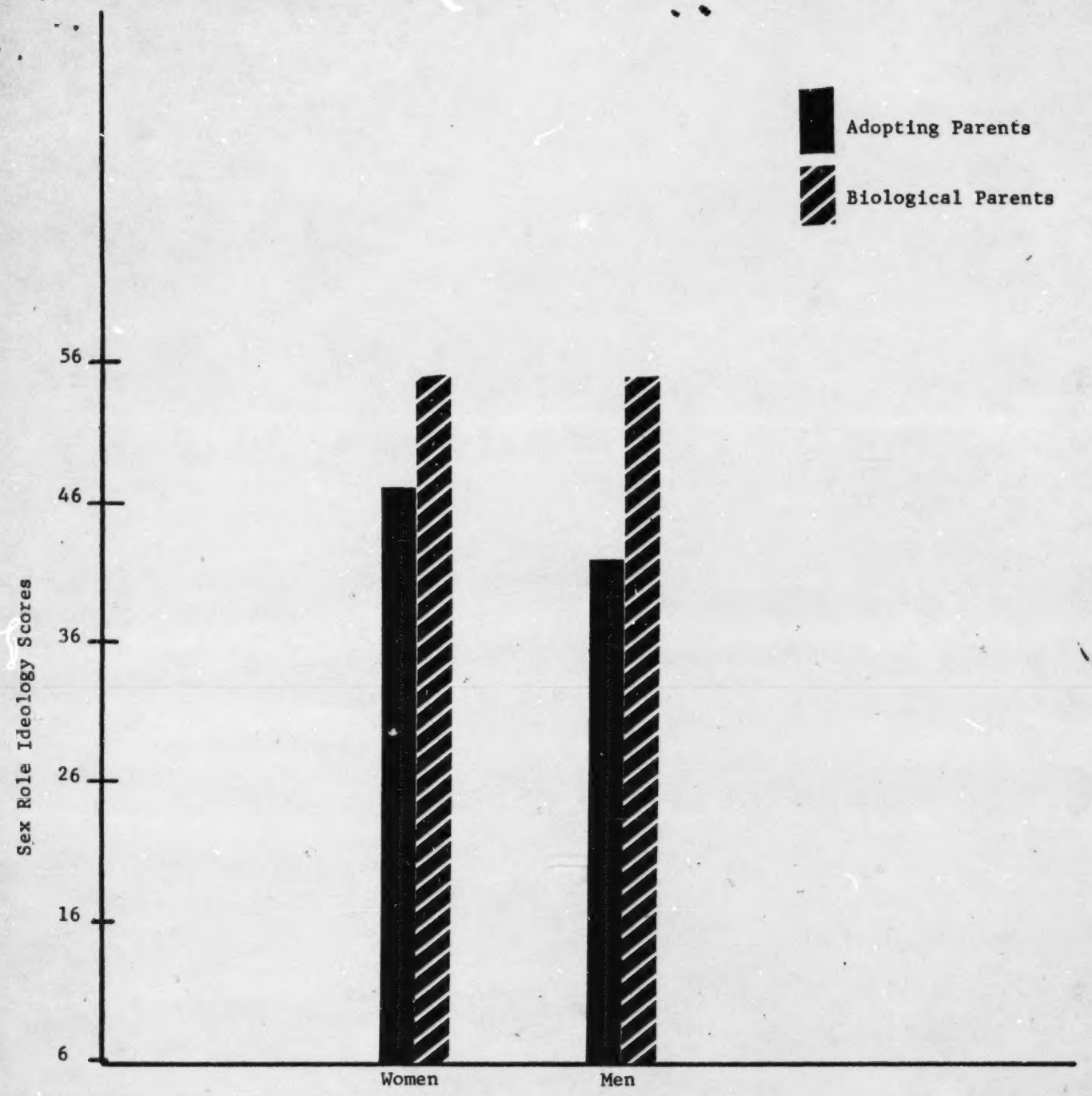


Figure 1: Comparison of Sex Role Ideology Scores

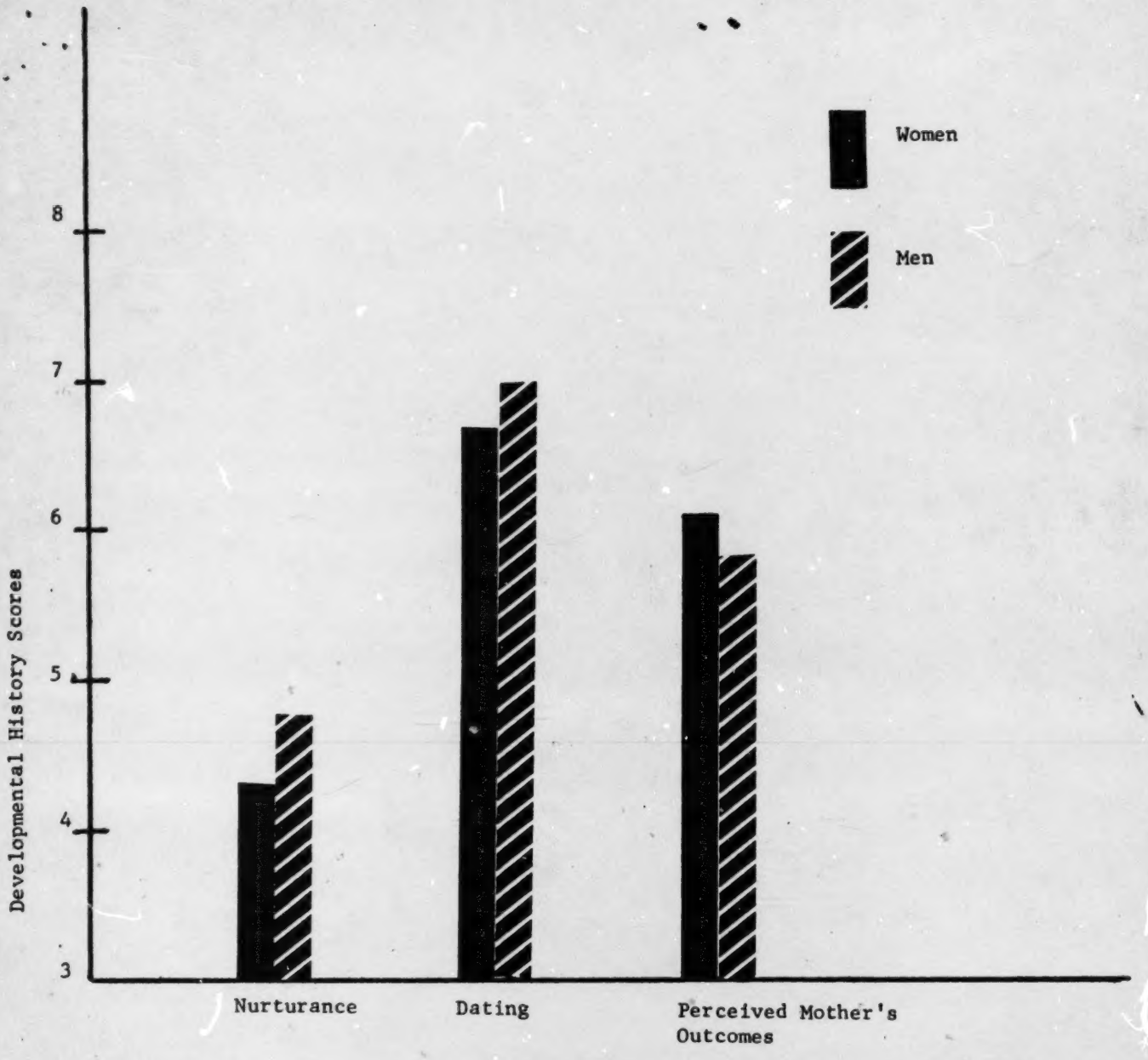


Figure 2: Comparison of the sex role developmental histories of men and women

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